TREASURES OF THE HEART
December 26, 1982
Luke 2:15-19

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The little girl in my arms was two years old. The annual Christmas pageant in the small Indiana church had lasted too long. It was crowded and hot and she had begun to squirm. So I had walked to the back of the little sanctuary, as inconspicuously as possible at about the time the angel, whom she had just recognized as the evening paper boy, was about to announce mysterious and wonderful news to our babysitter who, on that occasion, was the blessed virgin. We whisked up the aisle just as the little girl was about to announce to all present who these strangely attired characters really were. We stood against the back wall and could view the proceedings quite clearly. She watched with mounting interest: the manger, the cardboard sheep, the electric star suddenly shining, and the shepherds, whom she also recognized. The light of heaven shone upon them and the glory of the Lord was most certainly present, and when one of them said: "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing which the Lord has done," she could contain her enthusiasm no longer. In a voice as clear as a bell, projected over the heads of the congregation, she responded to the shepherd's invitation, "All right!" she said, "let's go." It was, literally, a show stopper. And the memory is a modest treasure in our household.

We keep going to Bethlehem for theological and ecclesiastical reasons, to be sure. The word became flesh indeed, flesh of our flesh! God so loved the world that he gave an only Son!...And we go to Bethlehem, in yearly pilgrimage, to reflect on it and wonder at it. But we go, as the small girl understood, personally, each of us, in the memories of the past--in the way the celebration of the birth of God's son is somehow mixed up with those high and holy moments which, for each of us, are treasures of the heart.

Mary's heart was full. At the oddest times she would remember something about it. Always on his birthdate, but increasingly at curiously random moments, she found herself remembering something or another that happened that strange night. She had been just a girl, and although no stranger to birth, she was not prepared for the experience when it began. She recalled what happened later that night with such feeling the thought had occured to her that anyone she tried to tell would think she had imagined it all, halucinating, perhaps. She could remember the pain and the animals and the flickering light of a lantern and Joseph: and as she rehearsed the details she seemed to recall a greater light, a bright hue which made the colors, the faces, the feelings less precise. Had they actually been there, those shepherds? Had they actually said what she remembered them saying, or had she imagined that too?

Joseph had been gone for years now. But even when he was alive they hadn't discussed it much although each knew the other knew and had seen and heard. How good it would be to talk to him. Had there been Magi too? Had royalty from across the desert actually visited her and her child?

She had pondered those things across many years. When they had made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem and he had stayed behind in the temple, she was reminded of what the shepherds said twelve years before. She was reminded of it all again when he had laid down the tools of his trade and, as if answering the voice of God, had followed his cousin John into the wilderness. And she had

had pondered long and hard through those next three hectic years. And when, at the end, on a hill outside Jerusalem, she had held his broken body close to her breast, her heart broken, she had remembered that night long, long ago.

The pondering of Mary: the treasures of her heart suggests the pondering each of us does at this time of year. It suggests to me, not nostalgia - for nostalgia's sake - because the season seems always about to wallow in sentimentality. It suggests celebrating our treasures simply because they are valuable. They help us to understand the value of our own lives and to know, in a particular way, who we are and who we can be.

How unfortunate that the value of our treasures is not always apparent at the moment. How sad that the value of relationships is not always dear to us until later, sometimes too much later.

I received a remarkable letter a while ago from a friend who was reflecting on this idea. He has given me permission to share his letter:

> "I realize as I grow older..., how many people have helped me during the course of my life--and, at the same time, how little I know, really, about each of them. Recently, for instance, I spent about three hours walking the beach with my sister, listening to her talk about our family... Those hours were meaningful to me--but they meant, among other things, that there are really large voids in my understanding of my own family, to say nothing of others outside my family.
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> "I wonder what can be done about this. It occurs to me that it would be an interesting family assignment, when the children are young for each child to write a description of persons who seem important to him. These would not be evaluated or even discussed as a family, unless the writer so chose--but in later years it might prove invaluable to the individual if for no other reason that the assignment required thought on a topic seldom considered. Along the same lines, I could think of no Christmas gift which would be more meaningful to me personally than a letter from each of my children just remembering, in very casual fashion, an event--any event--which seemed to be meaningful to the individual and perhaps indicative of the family life which we enjoyed together. I wish now that I had tried each year to write only a brief descriptive paragraph of my mother and father, people whom I thought I knew so well and who I now know I understood so little. I am sure that had I done so, a review of my previous thoughts would have led to a greater tolerance, a more meaningful affection, and quite probably, a better understanding of myself and the manner with which I approached my own problems as a parent."

May I make a modest suggestion about some unfinished business most of us keep on our agendas? A suggestion about keeping the feast of Christ's birth? Do what the letter writer suggested. Spread your treasures out: look at them: share their value with those who are responsible for them. Write it out, if you need to: tell them you love them, you delight in their special gifts, you are richer for their friendship.

Mary pondered the meaning of her child's birth,and, over the years, was sustained, I have to believe, by those precious memories. She also pondered the treasure of her baby's potential. Her strange visitors called her child a king, and my guess is that she never forgot that for a minute. Howard Thurman has written that every new child is humanity's answer to the darkness of bigotry, hatred, war, sickness, and death. Every new baby shows us for the incurable optimists we are. So your treasures and mine, memories of the past - essentially, are complimented by dreams and visions of what could be in our lives and in the world.

There is something infinitely precious about this birth which let's loose for all of us the possible - the potential of life as God wants it lived. The superficial greeting card message about every day becoming Christmas, has great and poignant truth behind it. May I make the modest but serious suggestion that Christ is honored more in the attention we give to that potential, than in sentimental birthday celebrations? May I suggest, modestly, that the most precious treasure of the heart which he has given you is the impetus to be more loving, more forgiving, more accepting, more courageous, and more dissatisfied with war and hunger and poverty? May I suggest that the greatest miracle of all is that the birth of Jesus has made us permanently dissatisfied with the unnecessary suffering in the world - in our own city. There is something about the birth of this child which makes any child's hunger intolerable. That, I would submit, is a very precious intolerance.

So, the birth makes us dissatisfied with broken relationships in our own lives. It is not just seasonal sentimentality which fills the air. It is the divine impetus toward healing, reconciliation.

Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart...Her treasures. Ours too. AMEN.

Great God of love, we give thanks for memories of Christmases past: for the ones with whom we have shared the feast. We thank you, O God, for dear and loving people with whom we share our lives. We thank you, as well, for the love and justice and peace and hope to which the birth of your son has, once again called us. Amen.